

# Connecticut Early Childhood Partners Strategic Plan

## Executive Summary

The Early Childhood Partners (ECP) process brought together eight State agencies and statewide institutions, with extensive input from numerous community interests over 14 months, to create an outcome-driven Strategic Plan to support all Connecticut families to ensure that their children arrive at school healthy and ready to succeed.

The Plan:

- Brings all early childhood efforts together in one common framework (see Figures II-1 and I-3).
- Informs Cabinet deliberations on policy and budget priorities for early childhood services
- Focuses on initiatives which bridge agencies and integrate services to achieve common outcomes for families and children.

The Early Childhood Partners have identified specific strategies based on the best thinking and latest research in the field to achieve what the National Governors Association refers to as “a ready State, ready communities, ready schools, ready families, and ready children.”<sup>1</sup> This Plan builds on the rich array of existing early childhood initiatives and services in Connecticut that will be drawn into a comprehensive early childhood service system.

## The Plan

The Strategic Plan aims to create an integrated service system that incorporates comprehensive health services, early care and education, and family support and parent education to ensure the sound health and full development of all children. This Plan acknowledges the fact that social setting around a child and family is a powerful influence on children’s development and strives to create a family-centered system that will provide for easy entry, clear navigation, and appropriate supports for all families to have children that are healthy and ready to learn at 5 years old. The Plan recognizes the importance of building accountable, community level, integrated service systems that are closest to and thus best equipped to see opportunities for systems improvements to meet expressed local needs.

ECP is premised on the need to support the efforts of families to meet the comprehensive needs their children in order for them to achieve school readiness.

The Early Childhood Partners share the following vision:

**All young children in every Connecticut family shall attain optimal health and school readiness by age five.**

The mission of ECP is:

**To build and sustain a comprehensive, integrated system of early childhood and family services that optimizes the health and learning of Connecticut children ages birth to five.**

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<sup>1</sup> “Building the Foundation for Bright Futures.” National Governors Association, January 2005. Online at -- [www.nga.org/cda/files/0501TaskForceReadiness.pdf](http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0501TaskForceReadiness.pdf)

**Guiding Principles.** Early Childhood Partners used the following principles to guide its planning efforts:

- Value individuals and respect their cultures and dignity. A complex and changing society will require diverse and effective approaches to service delivery
- Focus on the whole child and the family. Families are a central focus of young children's health and development.
- Focus on wellness and prevention. Health and development can and should be optimized for all children.
- Ensure family and community leadership
- Promote shared decision-making. Child development is a shared, public responsibility.
- Promote, support, and nurture effective early childhood partnerships at the State, regional and local level. Strong and innovative leadership is needed.
- Focus on outcomes.
- Assure accountability. Systems should be held accountable for outcomes.

**The Challenge.** The Plan conducted an environmental scan to define challenges and opportunities.

- ECP identified a total of \$490 million in state, federal, and other investments in early childhood services through 47 discrete program funding streams (see attached Figure III-1).
- Mechanisms for coordinating or integrating these functions are limited, resulting fragmentation of the planning and delivery of services.
- Early childhood services are primarily organized around funding streams and/or program eligibility criteria rather than the needs of the child and family.
- Family support and parenting education programs operate under different visions and definitions, often work at cross purposes.
- Funding for early childhood services is fragmented and inadequate.
  - Program quality is compromised.
  - Limited resources for essential accountability functions.
- Few model early childhood initiatives have been brought to full scale (e.g., Family Resource Centers, Nurturing Families, School Readiness, and Birth To Three)
- Data collection and outcome measurement is agency and program specific, with few efforts to link them and use them as a management and policy-making tool.

The Plan includes six goals.<sup>2</sup> The first three goals focus on the services that the integrated system will provide for children and families.

**Goal 1. Every child, adolescent and pregnant woman in Connecticut will have access to comprehensive, preventive, continuous healthcare through a family-centered Medical Home.**

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<sup>2</sup> For each goal, the Plan identifies key objectives, performance measures and partners in implementation.

- Goal 2. All children will have access to affordable, healthy, safe, and developmentally-appropriate early care and education programs with comprehensive support services for transitions to Kindergarten.**
- Goal 3. All parents will have access to the support and resources they need to raise healthy children.**

The other three goals of the Plan relate to the creation of a local and statewide infrastructure that will serve as the underpinnings for the integrated service system.

- Goal 4. Foster development of local or regional early childhood collaborative structures to improve and integrate services.**
- Goal 5. Create a state level infrastructure to guide, support, and monitor implementation of the Early Childhood Partners plan.**
- Goal 6. Promote public education and public will through a broad communication and engagement strategy.**

### **Bridging Strategies**

To accomplish the first three goals, the Early Childhood Partners have identified a number of key “bridging strategies” that span traditional agency boundaries and will enhance the quality and integration of services. All strategies will be implemented in culturally effective ways that respect and value the diverse cultural realities of individuals, families and communities.

These strategies, which are described in more detail in the body of the plan, include:

- **Create unified standards and common elements for family support**, based on best practices, that every state agency will use as a guideline in its activities related to family support services and programs. This work will be integrated with state efforts designed to support family economic progress, from emergency aid to workforce development.
- **Implement a multidisciplinary early childhood consultation model** to improve the capacity of early care and education providers to identify and address the diverse needs of children and their families and to integrate culturally effective best practices into their respective service models and curricula.
- **Support and expand the portal access point provided by the United Way Infoline** to better enable parents/families of young children to obtain information, services, and supports.
- **Create a coordinated system of screening and assessment for referrals and intake** across multiple service providers that identifies family strengths and needs.
- **Expand the medical home concept** across all health systems to create a holistic approach to delivering health care by addressing physical, behavioral/emotional, oral health and developmental health needs, with a priority focus on children with special, complex health care needs.
- **Establish unified standards and common elements to assure cultural effectiveness across multiple service providers to strengthen families and meet their diverse needs.**

- **Promote best practice models that integrate and/or link health, early care and education, and family support and parenting education** (e.g. comprehensive services in preschool settings)

Improving communication and coordination between the state and local levels, with the adjustment of state policies and practices to support local work, are fundamental prerequisites for the success of this plan.

**Local Infrastructure.** The Plan will encourage and support providers and other key stakeholders to launch new or expanded public-private partnerships at the community level to integrate improved services and make expanded birth to five investments. These early childhood collaboratives, building on the work of School Readiness Councils, local health departments, and local partnerships established with philanthropic support, will work with the State partner agencies to create a service delivery system that is focused on child outcomes, supportive and respectful of the family unit, and accessible to all through multiple points of entry.<sup>3</sup> Standard criteria will be developed to assess the family-centeredness of the system. Financial and technical assistance will be provided to ensure communities have the capacity and knowledge base to perform child- and family-level needs assessments and have access to a system for tracking progress and measuring outcomes.

**State-Level Infrastructure.** The Plan reflects the creation of an Early Childhood Education Cabinet established pursuant to legislation enacted in June 2005 to support state-level strategic planning, service integration, and outcomes measurement. The Cabinet will include the Commissioners of the departments with primary responsibility over early childhood services, including Social Services, Children and Families, Public Health, Education, Mental Retardation, and the Secretary of the Office of Policy and Management, the Executive Director of the Commission on Children, as well as the Co-chairpersons of the General Assembly committees with cognizance over education and human services, and representatives of local School Readiness Councils and the Connecticut Head Start Association. The Early Childhood Partners Strategic Plan and process of collaboration is the proposed vehicle for achieving the Cabinet's legislative mandate to:

- "Promote consistency of quality and comprehensiveness of early childhood services" and
- "Develop budget requests for the early childhood program."

The Cabinet will seek cross-agency policy and regulatory improvements, more integrated fiscal planning and expenditure, more robust performance outcomes, more effective relationships with local/regional collaborative efforts, and better strategic planning – all in the service of the Plan's goals. The Cabinet will be the mechanism to advance development of the state-level infrastructure required to support this work, encompassing the data management, sustainable financing, and public engagement crucial to effective Plan implementation. It will also allow the State to better evaluate and more equitably fund diverse early childhood programs and systems in a meaningful, effective and efficient way.

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<sup>3</sup> Current public-private efforts include the Graustein Memorial Funds' 50-community Discovery Initiative, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving's Brighter Futures Initiative, the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven's First Years First initiative, the United Ways' Success by Six efforts, and the Promoting Early Health and Learning initiative, funded by a collaborative comprised of the Children's Fund of Connecticut, the Connecticut Health Foundation, Graustein Memorial Fund, the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, and the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

**Public Education and Public Will.** In order to enhance public will and support for investments in building a more effective early care and education system for families and children, a public awareness and strategic communications effort will be mapped out as part of implementation planning. This will build on a number of ongoing initiatives such as Success By 6; Ready, Set, Grow; and Born Learning.

The campaign needs to feature consistent messages to parents about the importance of a child's early years and how they can positively influence this developmental stage of their children (e.g. the value of talking to your child, appropriate developmental milestones, etc.) as well as messages to the broader community on the importance of public investments in the early childhood system both to improve children's health and school readiness outcomes and to avoid the need for other remedial and preventable costly investments later in the child's and family life.

## **Implementation**

### **1. Work group process is underway to develop ECP Implementation Plans for key bridging strategies, building on existing initiatives**

#### **2. ECP Schedule**

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|---|-------------------|
| ▪ Three Year Implementation Grant Period Begins | September 1, 2005 |
| ▪ Completion of ECP Implementation Plan         | October 31, 2005  |
| ▪ Commencement of ECP Implementation            | December 1, 2005  |

#### **3. HRSA Federal Grant Budget**

- The total federal grant budget for ECP is \$129,000 in Year 1 (9/1/05-8/31/06) and \$140,000 in each of Years 2 and 3.
- The ECP Budget contains funds to support the operation of the Cabinet in the amount of \$40,000 in Year 1 and \$20,000 in each of years 2 and 3.

The Early Childhood Partners are committed to building on the many collaborative efforts in recent years to develop specific work plans and interdepartmental agreements to advance this Plan. It is proposed that the implementation will be driven by the new Early Childhood Education Cabinet and the ECP Steering Committee, with critical ongoing support from the federal Early Childhood Systems reform initiative through DPH.

## **Action Items for the Early Childhood Education Cabinet**

### **1. Designate the ECP Steering Committee as the Cabinet-linked interagency working group for development of Connecticut plans to “promote consistency of quality and comprehensiveness of early childhood services.” The Steering Committee will:**

- Develop the detailed **ECP Implementation Plan** by October 31, 2005, including specific activities and benchmarks for progress over the next three years for priority strategies
- Refine common child and system performance outcomes across early childhood services
- Provide oversight and guidance to the implementation of the plan

### **2. Assign staff to ECP Steering Committee (existing members or new)**

## Summary of Plan Goals and Objectives

### Comprehensive Health

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**Goal 1. Every child, adolescent and pregnant woman in Connecticut will have access to comprehensive, preventive, continuous health care.**

- Obj 1.1 Screen all children for special health care and oral health needs, providing for appropriate assessments and referrals.
- Obj 1.2 Expand and enhance the screening, consultation and referral resources based in Child Development Infoline.
- Obj 1.3 Expand the number of pediatric and dental practices and clinics providing medical and dental homes.
- Obj 1.4 Implement and expand programs and services for improving birth outcomes and early parenting experiences.
- Obj 1.5 Expand the number of children with access to continuous, primary health care.
- Obj 1.6 Build the capacity of the KidCare systems of care and the mental health provider network to address early childhood mental health needs.
- Obj 1.7 Increase the percentage of children with special health care needs who receive family-centered, coordinated care at their communities.

### Early Care and Education

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**Goal 2. All children will have access to affordable, healthy, safe, and developmentally-appropriate early care and education programs with comprehensive support services for transitions to Kindergarten.**

- Obj 2.1 Ensure access to quality early care and education for children ages 0-5 years through a variety of best practice models, targeting communities where children are achieving at lower rates.
- Obj 2.2 Ensure that low- and moderate-income families have access to child care subsidies to offset the costs of quality early care and education.
- Obj 2.3 Expand access to child care for children with special needs in appropriate settings.
- Obj 2.4 Meet the developmental needs of children through access to comprehensive health, mental health, and educational consultation for families and providers.
- Obj 2.5 Increase credentials and qualifications for early childhood teachers to enhance the development of young children across all domains.
- Obj 2.6 Ensure effective transitions from birth to Kindergarten.
- Obj. 2.7 Improve the capacity of center and home-based early care providers to serve hard-to-reach populations, including homeless children.

### Family Support and Parenting Education

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**Goal 3. All parents have access to the support and resources they need to raise healthy children.**

- Obj 3.1 Provide parents, non-custodial fathers, families, and all adults who take care of children with necessary skills and knowledge to nurture their children's development

- Obj 3.2 Create a system to integrate existing family resource and support centers and expand their capacity to serve additional families.
- Obj 3.3 Enhance local capacity for parent engagement and parent leadership to improve and impact quality of services.
- Obj 3.4 Facilitate access to economic, social support and education services to promote self-sufficiency among low-income families and strengthen communities.

## **Local Collaboration**

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To achieve the goals we set for our children and families, Connecticut communities of providers, families, and community institutions will need to work together and with the State Government in new ways. Across the state, communities are demonstrating new collaborative processes based both on local leadership, technical assistance from statewide partners, and examination of effective models in other towns and states.

### **Goal 4. Foster development of local or regional early childhood collaborative structures to improve and integrate services.**

- Obj 4.1 Develop an effective process, guidelines, and resources to support development of local/regional early childhood collaboratives.
- Obj 4.2 Empower parents and other consumers to participate in planning, implementation and evaluation.

## **State-Level Infrastructure**

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The State of Connecticut will need to organize itself around the needs of families and children in partnership with local communities to cross the various agencies, programs and funding streams. This will require the development of new structures as well as new capacities and processes to collect good information on the state of children, plan effectively, develop new financing streams and mechanisms to align with the integrated service delivery system, and build the support for this bold new direction.

### **Goal 5. Create a state level infrastructure with community representation to guide, support, and monitor implementation of the Early Childhood Partners plan.**

- Obj 5.1 Launch the Early Childhood Education Cabinet as the state level accountability structure with community representation to provide statewide leadership and direction for the comprehensive early childhood system.
- Obj 5.2 Establish an Early Childhood Research and Policy Network / Council to inform planning and policy.
- Obj 5.3 Develop reliable information systems that allow for cross-cutting management, quality assurance, research, and evaluation of early childhood policies and programs.
  - Develop and agree on common outcome and performance indicators and measures across early childhood service systems.
  - Enter into cooperative agreements among state agencies to share data and track children from birth through school entry.
  - Develop standard criteria to assess the cultural effectiveness of state service system and policy directions.

- Enhance the capacity of state and community to use data for planning, administration, and quality enhancement.
  - Expand health surveillance systems to inform systems planning efforts.
- Obj 5.4 Implement a cross-cutting financing plan that maximizes and integrates the use of the myriad federal, state, municipal, and private resources.
- Develop policies that allow funding to “follow the child” and bridge the gaps in eligibility inherent in the current categorical funding system.
  - Develop an early childhood budget annually that requires legislative approval and monitoring to ensure allocated funding is used as budgeted.
  - Create funding streams to pilot best practices and provide incentives for public-private funding partnerships.
  - Provide incentives for public-private funding partnerships that increase resources for research, evaluation and implementation of best practices.

**Goal 6. Promote public education and develop public will through a broad communication and engagement strategy.**

- Obj 6.1 Expand and align existing public awareness and strategic communication campaigns regarding the importance of early childhood child care, health and school readiness in a cohesive way to gain public support for a quality early childhood system.
- Obj. 6.2 Assure that different cultural communication styles and strategies are used to inform and engage the evolving diverse population.
- Obj 6.3 Facilitate ready access to information on early childhood research, advice, and issues through the web, all providers, and community institutions.
- Obj 6.4 Engage parents in all state and local/regional processes and activities aimed at improving the early childhood services and systems.